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MICHAEL PHELAN'S WIDOW

BY CHARLES T. HARVEY.

The summer of 1853 witnessed the commencement of the work of building the ship canal which was to open up the waters of the greatest of lakes to the commercial marine of its sister lakes in the basin drained by the River St. Lawrence, and make possible the vast commerce which has since been developed upon and through those mighty waters. Then the straggling village of "Sault Ste. Marie," situated near the base of the falls of the St. Mary's river (which, with over sixteen feet of descent within one lineal mile, compelled land carriage of persons and property around them), was nearly as remote from the outer world as a settlement upon the shores of Hudson bay would be at the present time. Two pairs of horse-hauling cars upon a tramway around the falls then sufficed to transfer all the commerce of the Lake Superior region.

The Federal Government having in 1852 made a grant of land to the State of Michigan in trust, wherewith to secure the means for building a canal around those falls, that State sublet the work of constructing it, for the right to the lands, to a corporation composed of Eastern State capitalists, who appointed the writer of this narrative as their executive, under the title of General Agent, to organize a force of workmen and enter upon the undertaking.

His headquarters were first temporarily located at Detroit, as the nearest city in direct communication, where he enlisted and accompanied a force of some five hundred men as the first detachment, and loaded one of the large lake steamers with them and a due quota of supplies and provisions, tools, machinery, horses, lumber, etc., for transportation to the locality of the work, as the sparsely-settled region about the falls could not be relied upon for such resources to any appreciable extent.

A commissariat was organized on the passage, and as soon as the landing was made, horses were hitched up into teams, the lumber hauled to the canal reservation, and in forty-eight hours the men were housed in improvised buildings and regular meals provided for them.

The system adopted was to assign fifty men to one house, or "shanty," calculated to furnish eating and sleeping space in the main structure, while a wing furnished room for a kitchen and the private apartments of the family who acted as stewards for that separate building. Each was numbered, and all were under the charge of a general steward, who had the care of the general supplies and kept accurate accounts with each "shanty," showing the aggregate per diem number of men boarded in comparison with the quantity of provisions consumed. Those stewards who furnished the best return as to economy and efficiency were paid accordingly, while those who were wasteful or slovenly were weeded out. To this was added later a hospital and infirmary annex, where workmen meeting with accidents, or having serious sickness, were sent to receive attention from salaried physicians and trained nurses free of charge, as the result of a small monthly per capita payment from those earning wages. These sanitary regulations were so efficient that the cholera epidemic which swept over the country in 1854 and stopped every other public work of magnitude, while showing its presence also at the "Sault," did not cause a panic nor suspend the work for a single day.

On June 4, 1853, the third day after landing, the workmen were organized into working gangs of thirty, each under selected foremen, and formed in ranks, while the General Agent, "breaking ground" by loading the first barrow with excavated material and wheeling it out to the "dump," set an example which was received with a cheer by the men, and generally followed, to continue for nearly two years, up to the time when the men were again gathered in a group to see the same individual, on the nineteenth of April, 1855, open the sluice-gate to the outer coffer-dam on the Lake Superior level and let its waters flow into the finished canal prism, doubtless never to be entirely excluded so long as the world endures.

The building of what was at that time the greatest canal in the world, so far as commercial importance or lock dimensions were concerned, in such a remarkably short period of time, was only possible by employing all the men that could work to advantage, and as a matter of fact the force was rapidly increased, after the first five hundred were fairly at work, until between two and three thousand were busily employed and the line of the work seemed to swarm like a bee-hive. The number of boarding buildings increased correspondingly, until between forty and fifty were under the supervision of the corporate management.

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Thus far by way of introduction to the tale indicated by the caption, and to the subsequent use of the first personal pronoun therein by the writer.

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It was in a sultry afternoon in the month of August, 1853, that I was engaged at writing in my private inner room on the first floor of the construction company's general office building, improvised near the banks of the ship canal at the "Soo" (as that point was generally designated). The entrance was at my back, and as a clerk was usually in the outer office to announce visitors beforehand, I supposed myself to be alone, and was absorbed with my desk work. The sensation that someone was breathing behind me led me to wheel in my revolving chair, and no doubt to look, as I felt, greatly surprised to find four unannounced individuals near me who had apparently been standing for some time with bated breath, awaiting my movements to secure my attention, which their entrance had not before arrested.

The group was composed of a woman and three girls, all neatly dressed, with faces endowed with a glow of health, ruddy as roses, combined with respectful and quiet demeanour rare to see at that time in that location.

The eldest girl was about twelve, the next about eight, and the youngest probably four years of age. The mother, evidently such from family resemblance, was apparently some thirty years old, rather undersized, and not specially noticeable except for her head-gear, which was a wonder to behold. I had seen pictures of such as having adorned high dames of the Queen Anne period, when an attempt was made to compress most of the beauties of a vegetable garden into the trimming of a high-crowned hat, but now I saw a specimen upon a living model, making an appearance indescribably grotesque. My eyes were drawn especially to one ornament which seemed to be intended to represent a blood beet of the brightest hue, the root lying obliquely along the rim of the structure, while the stem, branching into many upright leaves, towered above the head, counterbalanced by a carrot or some other rank growth of millinery on the other side.

I surmised at a glance that the "top-notty" affair had been bestowed by some wealthy lady (for it was evidently a costly adjunct to female attire) upon one who was not posted as to the caprices of fickle "Dame Fashion," and believed that what was good once, was always good, if in good preservation.

But before I had reduced my thoughts to speech suited to the occasion, the woman dropped an old style low "courtesy," her knees almost touching the floor, and broke the silence with that cheerily accentuated voice which marks a native of the Emerald Isle, and with the words, "Perraps, sorr, you do not know who I am ?"

"No," said I, "there is no doubt about that."

"Sure, I am the widow of Mister Michael Phelan; but, perraps, sorr, you have not heard of him before ?"

"No, I would hardly be able to identify him with certainty," I replied.

"And it is a pity," said she, "because he was a most worthy man, as good a husband as ever lived, and a good father to these little girls, pace to his mimery." Just there and then a genuine tear of affection glistened in the widow's eye and she proceeded, "And he started to come to Amerika with us on a vessel bound to Quebec. But we had a stormy long passage, during which he sickened and died, and despite all I could say or do, the captain had his body dropped overboard in the wide ocean, and I had to come along without him. We landed in Quebec and thence came to Montreal, where I tried to make a living by keeping boarders, but did not suc-

ceed as well as I could wish, and when I heard that a great public work was commencing here, and before it was done a great deal of money would be paid out for boarding of the men, I determined to come here, and by enquiry have found the way, but, on arrival, find that the company employing the men boards them itself, and that as you are the head man, I must come to you or I will have come in vain and won't know what to do for myself and these little ones. What I want is a chance to keep one of your boarding-houses."

"My good woman," I replied, "I control only those where fifty rough men are housed together and a family is paid to cook for them, of which the husband is the main element to keep order. You, surely, as an unprotected woman and the mother of these nice girls, would not wish to go into such quarters as that ?"

"Oh," said she, "if you will give me a chance with my own countrymen, they will not harm me or mine, I am sure; and you need not pay me wages till you see how well I can merit them, and I will meanwhile be earning the bread which we will honestly eat of your stores, and that is what I need to do without delay."

"But," said I, "these children will require more or less of your time and attention, and for you to care for them and attend to providing food and clean berths for fifty men, is simply impossible. Even if you were willing to undertake it, I would not consent to have you, out of respect for your sex in general, and for your welfare and that of these bright children in particular."

"Oh," said the widow, "these children can and will work and help instead of hinder me, as you will see if you only give us a chance."

But I shook my head more and more decidedly, and as the widow saw the tide turning against her with increasing force, a bright thought lit up her face, and she made motions to bring forth something stowed away in the bosom of her dress, exclaiming, "If you had only known Mr. Phelan, and what a good character he had, and how high he was respected by the great men in his own counthry, you would not deny the croy of his widow for honest work wherewith to feed herself and his children ! Did you ever hear of Lord John Russell, now in the Government in the Ould Counthry ?"

My reply was :—"Certainly, he is one of England's foremost statesmen of this day; but did he know your husband?"

"Ye may be sure of it," the widow continued, "as I have a certificate from his lordship, recommending Mr. Phelan on account of his good character, that I keep near me all the while, that I may niver lose it. Would ye like to see it ?"

"Oh, yes," I replied, "the signature of such a noted man as Lord Russell is well worth examining as a matter of curiosity."

In due time the widow drew forth her guarded treasure in the shape of a package having many wraps, from which, when unfolded, dropped a sheet of letter-paper with a printed heading, which she picked up and handed me as reverently as one would hand a prayer-book to a worshipper in church.

Glancing my eye over it, I found it to read substantially as follows :—

Estates of Lord J. Russell,
.....County, Ireland,
.....1852.

To Michael Phelan.

You are hereby notified to vacate the earth-walled thatched tenement now occupied by yourself and family near the ..... road, within thirty days from date of receipt hereof, as it is to be torn down and removed, by order of his lordship.

Attest.....
Agent for said Estates.

Dumb with amazement, I glanced from the paper to the widow, but her honest, serious look of satisfaction in possessing this evidence of her husband's good character was genuine; I had seen too much of the world not to have detected any counterfeiting of such faith as that, and I instantly divined that she could not read, and hence someone had imposed upon her as to the nature and contents of the document. There, also, stood the ruddy-cheeked girls looking up into my face as to a superior being whose lips could make or mar their happiness.

The situation being revealed as by a flash of light, my heart refused to let my lips be the medium of undeceiving the widow as to the purport of her paper, and of causing her faith in its talismanic powers to be dashed like a

fragile vase into a thousand pieces at my feet, never to be restored to its present symmetry and esteem; so, apparently reading the document through again and again, with most intense and deliberate attention, my thoughts were meanwhile busy in deciding how to act. They followed the track of this brave, confiding little woman, leaving her hovel in Ireland (it might be before dispossessing measures had been taken), which, however humble, was to her a home warmed by affection in local and personal attachments; coming across the stormy Atlantic only to see it relentlessly requiring the sacrifice of her husband for entombment in its dark caverns, with only the dirge and requiem of its wild, deep-toned waves; pressing on to Quebec and Montreal, and thence a thousand miles or more to this remote place, and now only asking for opportunity for honest and faithful employment at my hands; how could I refuse at least a trial as a reward for such faith and perseverance ?

'Twas a moment described by the great dramatist, when "one touch of nature makes the whole world kin." I beheld before me, not an ignorant immigrant, to be laughed at and thrust aside, as coming on a fool's errand, but a heroine, endowed with a priceless faith which could remove mountains, whose guileless, earnest appearance showed that as a daughter, wife, and mother she had done her best; and who could do more ?

My heart had its own way, and then my lips were no longer glued together.

"Mrs. Phelan," said I, as I handed back the document, with the air of one most profoundly impressed, "that certificate settles the matter; as the widow of Michael Phelan, you shall have a chance to provide for yourself and these children of his, if in my power to arrange it with promptness and decency."

Pen nor pencil can never depict the glowing of the light in the eyes of that mother, as she dropped another profound "courtesy," looked triumphantly in the faces of her three little girls, and carefully restored her talismanic certificate to its wrappings and place near her heart.

The general steward was summoned, and, learning from him that one of the steward families was just leaving and its successor not then installed, and that a very trusty single man was so far convalescent at the hospital that he could be detailed to keep order and render the widow any needed assistance, I directed that carpenters be summoned and a room in the main building be partitioned off for him forthwith, and the widow be at once installed in the family apartments, as solely for her own use.

Enquiring for her baggage, behold all her worthy possessions were just outside my office door, in the shape of a few bundles ! These she and the children gathered up, and, following the messenger, were directly installed in their new abode. The new arrival created a stir in the colony of adjacent buildings, with the query how a widow who only landed from Montreal in the morning could get the coveted steward position before night. Whether the widow ascribed it to Lord John Russell's influence to those who enquired of her, I knew not, but I was very careful not to mention the facts about her precious document to anyone. Even the general steward treated her more deferentially, from the evident endorsement which she had received at the manager's office, not knowing how it was obtained. Not a little of her success was due, however, to her own shrewdness in slipping by all intermediaries and stating her errand only where the final decision was to be made.

Some days later, in passing near her domicile, a glimpse of the widow brought her to mind, and led me to enter her building and inspect her care of it. Its order and neatness were most commendable. The daughter of twelve years was doing an adult's share of the kitchen service; the girl of eight was, in the men's absence, at work attending to cleaning their quarters, after having made the table ready hours in advance, while the little "tot" of four was seated on a barrel, to bring her to the right height, by a table, at which she was scouring the knives and other table articles with bath-brick, until they shone like silver, and with the steady action of a veteran who thought of nothing but the business in hand.

It was the custom of the steward's department to let the men choose their quarters and change about to suit

themselves, so long as the regular quota in each was not exceeded, and they applied for a transfer order at his desk. Soon he was flooded with applications for change to the widow's boarding-house, and, upon enquiry, was informed that it was the most quiet and orderly of any, while the meals in variety and cooking were what Delmonico's was to ordinary eating establishments.

The requisitions for supplies for that "number" contained some items not on the ordinary list, but were honoured after due consideration. Soon rumours of a new style of hash served up once a week at the widow's floated about the location, and even foremen called for transient meal tickets to try it, and envied were the men who held vested rights as regular inmates there.

The end of the month, with its tabulated statements, came round, when the figures indicated that the most economical and satisfactory results were from the widow's house. The second month confirmed such conclusion, when her rate of payment rose to the head of the list and continued there to the end of the work, netting her a very nice monthly income. She confidentially explained to the steward that the result was due largely to that famous hash, which, by being sweetened with maple sugar and flavoured with spices, enabled her to use the last scrap of every kind of food material on her premises without cloying the men's appetites.

She did not call for her monthly pay until the cashier entered a complaint against her that he could not close his monthly accounts according to rule. Word from me to call at the office brought her there in Sunday attire, including her before-described full dress hat. When the rule was explained that she must regularly draw her money, she complied, but only to bring it to me, to request me to personally care for it during her term of employment.

An amusing scene took place weekly. The widow was a regular attendant Sundays at the Roman Catholic missionary church some distance away, when she might be seen wending her way thitherward with her overshadowing perennial hat, only equalled in tinge of red by her own cheeks and those of her three girls walking demurely by her side. At a respectful distance behind her would follow a platoon of a score, more or less, of men, dressed in the height of canal fashions and all animated by evident intentions not to be far from her when inside the church, while the crowds outside the edifice formed in ranks to let her pass through, with special marks of consideration. Not a breath was heard against her, maintaining respect from all, and woe would have betided the man who had been reported to the fifty brawny Irishmen in her "number," as molesting her in any way.

One day, after the widow's reputation had become quite established, she, with her headgear in position, called on me in the same room as before, to confide to me that she had been asked to marry by not a few of the men, and of them all she thought most favourably of Patrick Flynn, who had been selected as caretaker for her in the first instance, but, after pondering well on the subject, when she had almost said yes, the memory of her dear departed husband, with his good character so well certified to, came over her, and she had told Patrick, like all her suitors, once and for always, that she would never be known otherwise than as the widow of Michael Phelan. Again came the tears as a tribute to his memory, with the remark that in case I heard she was to be married I would know to the contrary, in advance.

The widow dropped in very quietly at my office at a later date, and when energetic measures were taken which nipped in the bud an impending strike, many were the surmises where I had obtained the information upon which to act. Its value to my principals, under circumstances too intricate to be detailed here, could hardly be overestimated.

But the time arrived when the last gang of workmen were finally paid off, and a settlement of the widow's account showed over $600 to her credit. When handing it to her, I said, "No doubt you will take this snug sum and return to Montreal and open a nice boarding-house ?"

"Oh, no," said she, "when this canal is opened, business must go to the other end of the lake, and I am going with it to a place they call Superior City, and have engaged my passage by the next boat !" All that I had to

say about the risks and hardships involved was wasted, and before the canal was officially opened by the State, the widow who could not read her passage ticket was pushing on five hundred miles farther to anticipate its commercial effect!

Two or more years passed, when I paid a tourist's visit to the then "booming" settlement of Superior City, and was walking with a friend along its wooden sidewalks, when I was startled by having my own name called by someone behind me, and on turning about, saw the widow of Michael Phelan in a calico wrapper on her knees, with her hands raised above that wonderful bonnet, asking for "Heaven's blessings upon the best friend she ever had in America!"

Begging her to rise and not compromise me in a strange place, because onlookers would think that she was pleading for me, rather than with Heaven, she explained that she was the owner of the corner lot on the opposite side of the street, upon which she had erected a store building and was realizing a handsome rental from a part of it, while occupying the remainder for keeping boarders, and having seen me go by, was afraid that before she could don her best dress as she used to do at the "Soo," I would have passed out of sight. Patrick Flynn had followed her from the "Soo" and was installed as caretaker of her property but she had not, and would not, prove forgetful of the memory of Michael Phelan, or less proud of the good character which he bore in the "Ould Counthry."

Declining the request of the widow to look over her title-deeds and give my opinion upon their legality, on the score that the steamer on which I was making the round trip was just leaving, I left the widow in the midst of her corner lots.

Not long after this I read, in a leading New York paper, of an official decision as announced at Washington, confirming the right of Mrs. Michael Phelan, of Superior City, Wisconsin, to pre-empt a quarter section of land, her right to do so without naturalization papers having been stoutly contested, but on appeal, her title to valuable property near the city had been sustained at the Interior Department.

Time passed along a few more years, when I was a passenger between two of the ports in Lake Superior upon the then peerless steamer North Star, with the veteran Captain B. G. Sweet in command. While passing along the main deck, a comely, ruddy-faced young woman accosted me and introduced herself as the eldest daughter of the Widow Phelan. "Indeed," said I, "and where is your mother?" "Oh," said she, "mother is down here on the main deck against my protest, who wanted to have her take a couple of state-rooms, and let us travel in the cabin like other people, for we can afford it, and I wish you would get mother to do so."

"All right," said I, "we will see what can be done." Then the widow was interviewed by surprise and without her ornamental head-dress on, but I presumed that it was in one of the several sizeable trunks which evidently belonged to her. Her shrewdness was again evidenced by the fact that while paying only deck passage and saving probably three-fourths of the cost of cabin rates, she had preempted a space behind the huge boiler smoke-pipes and fenced it off with her trunks and other articles of the cargo, so that within the barrier herself and daughter were quite retired and had warm quarters, while the cabin passengers were shivering in smaller and colder places upon the unheated upper deck on a chill autumnal day.

Entering into conversation as to her leaving the west, she informed me that she saw signs of a decline in the land speculation which had prevailed (and which shortly afterward entirely collapsed and continued thus for a decade or more), and had, in anticipation of lower prices, sold out, with a view of leaving that region permanently. "Well," said I, "how much money do you bring away with you?" But the widow was slow to divulge, and at last her eldest daughter spoke up and said, "Mr. Harvey, to prove that we ought to have taken cabin passage, I will tell you. Mother has thirty-six hundred dollars in gold in these trunks, besides enough more in bank-bills to provide for all our travelling expenses for a long journey, and yet she will keep up on the main deck where poor immigrants ride, and now, as the kind

friend she has taught us to remember, will you not insist upon our having state-rooms ?" "Oh, yes," said I, "that is reasonable enough, but your mother has a mind of her own, which she has certainly used to good advantage since I have known her, and I have learned to deem it better than my own, as to her own affairs."

"But now, Widow Phelan," I continued, "you will certainly consider that I ought to know where you are proposing to go ?"

"To a place they call Australia," she replied.

"But do you know how far off it is and how to get there ?" was the next query.

"No," replied she, "but I am told that at a city called New York, where I am now going, I can get passage."

"Pray, what led you to think of that distant land ?" I queried.

"Well," said the widow, "I have been informed that the Governor of Australia is an intimate friend of Lord John Russell, and therefore a friend of my husband's, and one who will appreciate the certificate I have of the good character of Michael Phelan as you did, and who will treat his widow well on his account !" Then the scene in my office came vividly to mind, and again I was speechless about that document, which I doubted not was then, as before, near the widow's heart.

The steamer's whistle announced landing at the port of my departure, and ended my personal knowledge of the widow of Michael Phelan. But the Phelan history, if continued, might reveal her, later on, as a Melbourne real estate millionaire, and her daughters as among the aristocracy, driving in their own or their husband's carriages. All these issues may have hinged, as did those narrated, upon my keeping my face straight and my heart warm when the power of that talismanic certificate was tried upon myself on that August day away back in 1853.

CHARLES T. HARVEY.